

Research Article

The Stranger's Meursault: An Epitome of an Existential Hero

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Abstract

Existentialism is a key literary theory of twentieth century. Albert Camus occupies a very prominent place among twentieth century writers. He is considered as the greatest exponent of the literary theory termed as existentialism. He gave a very vehement expression to the existential characteristics like alienation, detachment, anxiety, choice, freedom, responsibility etc. in his literary outputs. He gave to the existential literature such masterpieces as *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), *The Fall* (1956) and *A Happy Death* (1971). Camus in his masterpiece *The Stranger* gave to the literary world a character named Meursault, who is considered as probably the greatest existential character till date. The objective of this research paper is to study Meursault in the light of existential theory and establish him as an epitome of an existential hero.

Keywords: Existentialism, epitome, exponent, refuted, masterpiece.

Meursault is the chief protagonist of Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger*. He is a clerk, in his thirties; he lives his life on his own terms, of total indifference and utter disregard of all social norms. He is fed up with his job, working as a shipping clerk performing monotonous and mundane tasks, which he does not like. He tries to fill his weekends with activity, but often finds himself walking around his apartment, smoking, and staring out into his neighborhood. Meursault, a true epitome of an existential character as he is, exemplifies in his character all the characteristics associated with a "transformed human" (Kumar 1). He showcases the strangeness and sense of detachment of his character in the way he reacts to the telegram that notifies him of his mother's death. He narrates, "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'Mother Passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been Yesterday (4). The casualness of approach shown by him while uttering these words, after coming to know about the devastating news of the death of his mother, certainly shows the sense of detachment of his character. He shows literally no sense of grief and remorse over his mother's death, nor does he weep. Any other person would have been extremely pained and would have reacted

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differently, upon receiving such news. Sprintzen, finds his behavior quite objectionable and finds strong existential elements in such a behavior and observes that this is not the normal reaction of a son to the news of his mother's death and asks:

What kind of a person responds in this matter- of – fact way? Are we not at first put off by such casualness? Perhaps even scandalized by our initial encounter with Meursault? Is not this Meursault a stranger to our normal feelings and expectations? We sense a distance (23).

Meursault showcases the uniqueness of his character and his existential instincts not only in that incident, but throughout the novel. His behavior is strange not only when he receives the news of his mother's death, but also what he does afterwards. He was not shaken or sad after that. He behaves quiet normally as if nothing upsetting has happened. He boards a bus to the old people's house where his mother used to live. During the course of journey he takes a sound sleep. After reaching the place, he throws all the social norms to a toss, when he refuses to see the dead body of his mother. Throughout the night he disinterestedly sits by the coffin, drinks coffee, smokes cigarettes and eventually dozes off in the room where his mother's dead body lies. On the next day, during funeral procession, instead of sparing a thought for his mother or her memories, he focuses solely on the weather, the sun and the landscape. He very closely observes the attendees of the funeral and comments on their physical state and dresses, which is quite unbecoming of a son whose mother has died:

Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied highly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I'd never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost very thin and carrying walking sticks.

What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn't see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. (8)

These words of Meursault based on his observations of the persons attending funeral of his mother clearly shows his character lacking in any sort of emotions or concern for the occasion. His prime focus is on the outward appearance of the persons present and it reveals his attachment to merely the physical aspects of one's personality. He very keenly observes the surroundings and even comments on them. He relates how he noticed that "for quite some time now the countryside had been alive with the humming of insects and the crackling of the grass" (12). Then he very vividly describes the nature, "All around me there was still the same luminous sun drenched countryside. The glare from the sky was unbearable" (11). What strikes the most is the fact that he feels a sense of relief after the burial of his mother and feels "joy" at the thought of "going to go to bed and sleep for a whole twelve hours"(13).

The way he adopts his normal lifestyle immediately after the death of his mother also marks him as an existential hero. Instead of spending some days in mourning he immediately plunges into worldly pleasures. He goes to a swimming pool and there he meets Marie, flirts with her and describes in vivid detail his physical pleasure of the summer, the sky, the sun, the water in the following words:

I was good and as if for fun, I let my head sink back onto her stomach. She didn't say anything and I left it there. I had the whole sky in my eyes and it was all blue and gold. I could feel Marie's stomach throbbing gently under the back of my neck. We lay on the buoy for a long time half asleep. When the sun got too hot she dived off and I followed. I caught her up, put my arm round her waist and we swam together. (14)

After having fun with her at swimming pool, he takes her to watch a comedy movie during evening. After watching movie he takes Marie to his place during night and indulges in sensual pleasures with her.

Meursault being an existential hero to the core, observes the world through his five senses. He enjoys all those things which are connected with senses. So the abstract ideas like love, sympathy, compassion and attachment has no place in his life. And typical of an existential character, he is a detached observer and he seldom has an interaction with others. He cares a damn about the rules and customs of the society. Meursault idle away his free time in the balcony and keenly observes the activities of the persons from there.

The uniqueness of his character and behavior are evident in his relationship with his neighbor Salamano. Salamano throughout the course of the novel abuses and beats his dog. While all the other neighbors of Meursault condemn his behavior, Meursault remains merely a silent spectator to the inhuman behavior of Salamano. Same is the case with regards to his relationship with Raymond. Whereas all the denizens of his locality firmly believe that Raymond is an immoral man, Meursault finds no reason in not talking with him and befriending him. He behaves quite normally with him, like he would have done with other beings. Meursault enjoys his company as he finds what he says as interesting and enjoys chatting with him. He even fulfils a very improper demand of Raymond of writing a letter that would reveal the infidelity of Raymond's mistress. He rather uninterestedly narrates the incident thus: "I did it rather haphazardly, but I did my best to please Raymond because I had no reason not to please him" (36). He even readily agrees to be Raymond's witness after he had a brawl with his mistress. All these incidents clearly establish the existential anguish in the character of Meursault. His whole struggle is for existence and his craving for that is clearly established during the course of novel.

Meursault typical of an existential character believes in living his life in the present. According to him present is the most important time and one must devote all his attention and energy to enjoy the present moment and one must not pine for and keep dreaming for a bright, unknown future. Meursault lives in the present moment and takes life as it comes. He is not at all ambitious. Ordinary man lives his life with some aims, a concern for the future. He weighs pros and cons or ramifications of his actions and he waits for his day. But, according to Camus, it is "a sin to denigrate the life that we have and invent a better one, to refuse the present and hope for a future"(17). Meursault as an example of Camus's worldview does not aspire after the future and is closely attached to the present moment. He believes in living in the present and shows no pining for a prosperous future. He believes in living in the present and his, this sense of detachment is evident when his boss gives him a proposal of a posting at Paris for a bright future:

I said yes but really I didn't mind. He then asked me if I wasn't interested in changing my life . I replied that you could never change your life, that in any case one life was as good as another and I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine here... I'd rather not have upset him, but I couldn't see any reason for changing my life. Come to think of it' I wasn't unhappy. (44)

Another very disturbing aspect of Meursault's personality comes to the fore with regards to his relationship with the Marie. When Marie once asked him whether he loved her or not, he answered very vaguely, "I said that sort of question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn't" (24). On the Marie's proposal of marriage also Meusault's response was very strange and very typical of existential crisis of his soul. When Marie puts forth the proposal of marriage, his response was:

I explained to her that it really didn't matter and that if she wanted to , we could get

married... She then remarked that marriage was a serious matter. I said 'NO'...She just wanted to know if I'd have accepted the same proposal if it had come from another woman with whom I had a similar relationship . I said 'Naturally.' (28-29).

This vague and absurd response to such an important event of one's life quite naturally can't be a remark of an ordinary person. As stated earlier the so called social conventions that involve abstract concepts such as love, hatred, grief, ambition, and commitment are totally beyond his comprehension. He only believes in those matters which are related to senses or sensual pleasures. Due to such habits he instinctively gets involved with the events and which eventually leads to his downfall.

The most striking example of the effect of immediate experience and physical stimuli on his personality can be seen during the incident on the beach when he confronts the Arab. Before the start of deadly confrontation, Meursault witnesses that Raymond has a fight with two Arabs and he tells Raymond to hand over his gun to him in order to avoid the confrontation taking some ugly or deadly turn. Raymond obeying Meursault's call hands over his gun to him and returns to the beach hut. But even then existential crisis of his soul comes to the fore and although he says that it was too hot and "unbearable just standing there in the blinding rain that was pouring out of the sky . . . whether I stayed there or moved, it would come to the same thing" (58) and he finally chooses to walk on the beach. Now this incident and thought process of Meursault portrays the existential crisis of his soul. For him, there exists no difference between the two alternatives, whether he stays on the beach or go back to the beach house, for him everything exists on the same level. However intense heat generated by the sun on the day starts taking its toll on him. He feels a bit dizzy and describes the incident as following when he saw the Arab for second time on the beach:

The sun was beginning to burn my cheeks and I felt drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows...And because I couldn't stand this burning feeling any longer, I moved forward... All I could feel were the cymbals the sun was dashing against my forehead and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear still leaping up off the knife in front of me... The sky seemed to be splitting from end to end and raining down sheets of flame. My whole being went tense and I tightened my grip on the gun. The trigger gave, I felt the underside of the polished butt and it was there, in that sharp but deafening noise, that it all started . (38-39)

The above lines ascribed to Meursault clearly establish his existential state. The details presented in the above quote very minutely describe the Meursault's physical state before he shoots the Arab and it tries to depict that Meursault was not at all responsible for the death of Arab. He was shown as merely following the flow of the moment and got carried away by the moment, climate and atmosphere of the day. He undertakes a criminal act but done without any criminal intentions. Meursault under the powerful impact of the sun, pulls the trigger and at the very moment that, "each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing" (39). Meursault was ultimately arrested, put into prison, where his actions and choices are questioned and accountability is fixed for his actions.

The casualness in approach of Meursault even goes on after the murder, during his stay in the prison and subsequent prosecution. He clearly marks himself as an existential character during the course of his interrogation. During his first examination by examining magistrate, the magistrate looks at him very curiously. When he inquired of him, whether he had chosen a lawyer to defend himself, Meursault answers very vaguely, "NO, I hadn't thought about it, and asked him if it was really necessary for me to have one." (40). During subsequent interrogation

and cross examination, Meursault is very calm, indifferent and straightforward in his replies: as he never chooses to disguise his true feelings and emotions. He expresses his views in a very forthright way without thinking for a moment about the consequences of his words and actions. Even his lawyer warns him that the casualness and indifference shown by him at the funeral of his mother will definitely turn the jury against him and he strongly advises him to change his statements about his mother's funeral. But despite that warning Meursault was not at all shaken and very forthrightly replies:

...but I explained that my physical condition at any given moment often influenced my feelings. For instance, on the day I attended Mother's funeral, I was fagged out and only half awake. So, really, I hardly took stock of what was happening. Anyhow, I could assure him of one thing: that I'd rather Mother hadn't died. The lawyer, however, looked displeased. "That's not enough," he said curtly. After considering for a bit he asked me if he could say that on that day I had kept my feelings under control. "No," I said. "That wouldn't be true." (41).

Meursault's lawyer was extremely disturbed at his rigidity with regards to his being true to his feelings and emotions. He was very unhappy at his inability to lie about how he felt at his mother's funeral and even warns him that his, this stance will ultimately prove to be his undoing. But Meursault was determined to maintain his honesty at all costs. Throughout the course of his trial, he forsakes all the opportunities to merely pretend grief over his mother's death and show remorse for the man he shot. He, as per his lawyer can earn the sympathy or mercy of the jury by doing so. But he flatly refuses to pretend and remains true to himself and his feelings. So, it would not be wrong to sum *The Stranger* as the story of a character who without any heroic pretensions, agrees to die for the truth. He was not even afraid of giving answers which threatened his existence. He acknowledges his acts without being hypocrite.

Meursault, a true existential hero to the core firmly believes himself to be master of his destiny and refuses to be cowed down by the threats of the God. The magistrate was shocked by the atheism of Meursault. Magistrate had firm belief in the God and firmly believed that the universe is fully controlled by the God and life is meaningful only through God's existence. But, Meursault being a true existential character believes that there is no supernatural power like God that can help him out. He firmly believes that he himself can make his life meaningful. He firmly believes himself to be the creator of his destiny and is fully prepared to face the consequences of his actions. So, true to an existential hero he refuses to bow before a supernatural power to seek forgiveness for a better future, as he believes that it will be of no use. So he continues to live his life in the present and totally indifferent of the established norms and beliefs of the society. Even when sentenced to death, he owing to his sheer willpower and thought process comes to terms with his destiny. When priest before his hanging asks him to spare some time to pray to God, he flatly refuses, as he thinks that he has not much time at his disposal and he don't want waste that on God.

So, from the above discussion it can be concluded that Meursault is a true epitome of an existential hero. He lives his life on his own terms showing utter disregard for society and social norms. He remains true to his self throughout the novel and refuses to be a hypocrite in order to avoid the strict punishment. By doing so he chooses his own destiny and he fully owns up the consequences of his thoughts and actions. Camus by giving such a great existential character to the literary world, opened the doors for other writers to model their characters on him.

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